

Participant-centered orthography workshops – two models

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1. Introduction

- It's a rare situation today when an outside linguist takes *primary* responsibility for developing an orthography for an unwritten language. What happened as a matter of course 40 years ago is almost unknown today.
- Orthography design is a concrete contribution that language documenters can make to language communities, leading to literacy and often to increased language vitality, as embodied in the EGIDS scale (Lewis & Simons 2010, Boerger 2015). While many orthography *issues* are discussed in the literature (Grenoble & Whaley 2006, Seifart 2006, Lüpke 2011, and Cahill & Rice 2014), these do not present practical procedures of a *methodology* for working with local speakers to develop an orthography.
- This paper presents a summary of two models of participant-centered field workshops for orthography development. It is aimed at those interested in orthography development or reform. The workshop concepts here each have been used with over 100 languages, are heavily participant-oriented, and assume some level of literacy on the part of local speakers. If such a level is absent, then an outsider must take a more active role.

2. Model 1 – Alphabet Design Workshop/Midwife Model (Easton 2003, Rice et al 2008ff).

- “Alphabet Design Workshop” developed by SIL in the mid 1990s for over 100 languages in Papua New Guinea (Easton 2003)
- “Midwife Approach” developed by Kris Stenzel, presented at every CoLang since 2008 (Rice, Stenzel, Hyslop, Fitzgerald, Cahill). (*The two labels have very similar approach.*)
- Local speakers (literate in some language) write a page or two of text. Other speakers examine these and note places where they see some orthographic issue.
- Questions are collected, organized, discussed by local speakers, and decisions are made.
- This is a relatively rapid method, since it does not depend on a full phonological analysis, but only focuses on areas where there are particular issues for the speakers.
- A change in traditional methodology:
 - A. *Attitude Change: As we are invited to help a community with the design of their alphabet, let us go with two attitudes in mind: 1) our job as a facilitator, not the doer; and 2) the ability to accept the imperfections that will arise...The ownership of the orthography...is in the hands of the speakers of a language. They must make the decisions regarding how the orthography should look and how to spell the language.*
 - B. *Methodology Change: Traditionally, SIL workers elicited lengthy random wordlists on which the phonological analysis and resultant orthography were based....In order to start from a more emic base, the course will use directed wordlists [after the initial text collection - mc]... The course will also include a writers' workshop in order to test the orthography decisions right away. (Gasaway 1993?:1-2)*

These changes reversed the roles previously held in orthography development, allowing for the process to be controlled by, and belong to, the language community itself. (Easton 2003:2):

2. Model 2 – “Participatory Method” (Kutsch Lojenga 1996, earlier work by Wieseemann)

- In this, about 1000 words are collected on slips of paper and transcribed by local speakers in whatever way they can. You can use a Rapid Word Collection workshop, the semantic domains in FLEEx, or some other method. A gloss in a language of wider communication must also be on the slip, so the speaker knows what word was in mind.
- These slips are then placed by native speakers into piles, and sorted by contrastive sounds. For example, to discover vowel contrasts, ideally, disyllabic words containing only identical vowels are extracted first. (V_iCV_i or CV_iCV_i ; the exact instructions would vary by language, e.g. if nouns have obligatory class prefixes.) These slips are arranged into various piles, each pile containing only words with the same vowels.
- Get V_iCV_j and CV_iCV_j to find systematic gaps (co-occurrence restrictions).
- The native speakers, crucially, determine what is “the same” vs. “different.” This takes advantage of their perception of the sounds, which an outside linguist sometimes misses. Consonantal, tonal, and other suprasegmental contrasts can all be determined by this procedure.

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